

Challenges that Threaten the Demise of the 21st-Century Church

Like the early Christian church, the modern church faces numerous challenges, which range from institutional to cultural. The challenges encompass different faith traditions, denominations, ethnic groups and sectors of society and incorporate modern technology as well as cultural values, and they could threaten the demise of the old-model church.

Over the past few years, particularly following the detection of the pathogenic virus known as COVID-19, churches have strategized to offer virtual worship sessions and needed services and virtual communication to congregations and deal with in-house and outside social challenges. Pastors and church leaders have attempted to understand what they might need for providing an effective ministry within a technological setting.

They have attempted to develop or adopt technology and employ adept personnel to meet the perceived technological and social challenges to the church.

Digital ministry represents a major challenge to many churches and involves social media and modern technology. Social media offers more space for congregations to participate in services and engage remotely with other congregants.

Technology encourages the creation of websites and the sharing of the Christian faith through such channels as blog posts, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Digital ministry permits a blended approach to in-person and online worship and interaction.

According to a “New Study Reveals How the American Church

Depends on Tech, Digital Media,” by Movieguide Staff and published online in February 2022, many churches believe a digital presence remains essential for church ministry in the United States.

The same study reveals a large percentage of churches in the United States do not have a long-term strategy for a full digital ministry. Technology and social media appear to be the preferences for the future. Technology applies scientific knowledge for practical purposes and can keep attendees updated during a particular in-house service or permit virtual attendance.

Social media serves as a platform for broadcasting information and can offer considerable space for congregations to respond to sermons on Twitter while watching or participating in worship together online. Livestreaming of services is expected to continue in many churches.

The training and preparation of successful leaders present another challenge. In “The Art of Digital Ministry: The Good, the Bad and the Uncertain,” Fuller Studio points out that pastors working in a digital setting should be “media artists with new vision to beckon technology to speak in new ways about an old message.”

Inadequately trained leaders can cause communication issues, but incorrect use of technology or even an element of digital ministry can seriously distract from such worship aspects as prayer and can cause attention levels to wane.

Not only do technology and digital ministry challenge the modern church, a variety of social issues also confront the institution. In 2016, Brett McCracken presented a list of “21 Challenges Facing The 21st Century Church” on his blog. Among the challenges were the following: the need to reconcile racism, sexuality, the question of religious freedom, the lack of trust in authority and the question of allegiance to empire

versus church.” Mr. McCracken readily admitted his list was not exhaustive and that it reflected an American evangelical viewpoint.

Regarding racism, the McCracken paper declared that the church had long neglected to address the racial issue and promote racial justice and suggested the need to maintain a consistent biblical ethic on sexuality while acceding to certain government regulations to avoid legal or legislative entanglements. The paper suggested that churches should continue to embrace transcendent authority despite a current tendency among younger generations to distrust authority.

In the paper, Mr. McCracken acknowledged that the church should accept and respect multifarious identities while encouraging the adoption of a Christ-oriented allegiance.

Active California pastors identify both technological and social issues as current challenges to the church. In recent emails, Reverend Cathy Burkholder, Executive Pastor of Danville Community Presbyterian Church, emphasized digital engagement and online strategy as two major concerns, and Reverend Bart Garrett, Senior Pastor of Walnut Creek Presbyterian Church, identified social media and technology “as weapons of mass distraction.”

In another email, Reverend Will McGarvey, Pastor of Pittsburg Presbyterian Church and Executive Director of the Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County, noted racism as a major challenge. Reverend Ron Musch, Executive Pastor of Clayton Community Church, pointed out that the church faced a major challenge in finding ways to reach and aid people who have less time to dedicate to their own spiritual growth in his correspondence.

COVID may have subsided, but challenges to the church will not end in 2022 or beyond. Churches must accept extended challenges, focus on their mission and emphasize discipleship.

An integrated vision and culture should remain a consistent challenge.

Successfully countering challenges produces resistance and helps develop inner fortitude and resilience capacity. The church can navigate its way through its many challenges, knowing that it can overcome the obstacles inherent in the challenges; with God's support, it can learn from its struggles and benefit from any mistakes it may make.

It can offer more than just a venue for worship on Sunday morning and a site for meetings during the week. It can serve as a major source of inspiration and assist individuals and groups wrestling with their own problems. {eoa}

Franklin T. Burroughs was awarded a Nishan-e-Homayoun by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi for his work in the Iranian Ministry of Court and has received certificates of recognition from the California Senate and State Assembly. He is a member of the adjunct faculty of John F. Kennedy University and has served as president of Armstrong University and interim dean of the School of Business at Notre Dame de Namur University. He has taught at the University of California at Berkeley. He has been the managing director of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in Iran and has served as consultant to the Ford Foundation, UNESCO, the U.S. Department of Commerce and the government of Iran.